

How to Develop Solitude

(Summarised transcription of Dhamma talk no.170hh)

Q: The Buddha encourages the development of seclusion. What then is the best way to cultivate it?

Nm: You need to start exposing yourself to seclusion because you're not going to prepare yourself for seclusion if you never spend time alone, or if you're always socialising. Being ready for seclusion cannot come out of that because it's completely the opposite. So as helpful as people can be, for one's well being. Needing others is a compromise. Whether you're a layperson or a monk doesn't matter. But when I say needing others is a compromise, I'm speaking specifically about needing others for your existential well being. That's a massive compromise and a huge risk if you never grow out of it.

We are all owners of our actions, nobody else is responsible for your actions. What you do stays with you. No other person can help you with that or take away from your burden or add to it. It's always on you, your intentions, your decisions, your actions will always stay in you. You are bound with your actions and the subsequent results. So, existentially, you're alone whether you want to be or not. And the recognition of that existential principle is where the practice starts. The experience is always me and others. Even if others are your closest friends, partners or relatives, it's still others. You can have very close others but for you, it's still just you. And when it comes to your feelings, your intentions, your responsibilities, they cannot be shared among the group.

Q: I can tell you how I feel but I cannot give you my experience of feeling.

Nm: Yes, the dimension of your feeling is inherently inaccessible to me. In as much as my feeling is inherently accessible to anybody other than me. As I mentioned before, solitude is not optional, existence is not optional. Existence is solitary and that's why if somebody wants to overcome and undo *Bhava*- the existence, you need to start recognizing the inherent principles of it. So for as long as you don't leave the group, how can you develop solitude? How can you see through it? How can you discern that neutral feeling that the Buddha praises, for which solitude is required?

Most people who are not used to solitude, when they are left alone, boredom is the first result. Which is a lot more problematic than one might initially think because if you stay with your boredom, it starts turning into a restless panic, fear, anxiety. And that's when you realize how much you actually depend on your perception of others around you. How much you depend on that in order to conceal that inherent nature of your existence, that you are alone and fundamentally, that you're not in control. That's why most people are so terrified of boredom, because their whole existence, their whole lifestyle goes against that nature of existence, that you are not in your control, that you are alone. So that's why every little reminder of that is frightening for people who are not used to it.

Of course, you can't expect to just jump into solitude overnight, because you could legitimately lose your mind but at the same time, to use that as an excuse to never do it and never prepare yourself for it. Well, that's equally ignorant. So you want to recognize "Okay, I'm not ready to jump into that extreme solitude right away. Which means I should make myself ready because what do I think death is? Is it any different from cessation or cancellation of all my means of escape from myself, cancellation of sensuality, cancellation of company, cancellation of all my distractions?!". That's why death is the ultimate terror for an ordinary person (*putthujana*) who is fundamentally, existentially dependent upon others, upon sensuality, upon distraction.

Some people use examples of others who jumped into solitude and lost their mind, as proof that solitude is unhealthy. Well, that's just non-wisdom speaking. A person can do it too quickly, which means they must just slow down a bit. You don't have to abandon the goal of solitude just because you don't know how to develop it correctly. Whether you go too fast or too slowly, it does not compromise the quality of the goal, which is the delighting in solitude.

Whether it's a layperson or a monk, doesn't matter, you review your mind, reflect upon and see whether you are ready to live in solitude? Without having anything to do, without having any interactions for the majority of my day? Would I be able to just be with myself? Or would I have to extra commit to some sort of meditation technique to manage solitude? Would I have to keep finding things to do so that I don't drown? Do I delight in solitude, am I at ease in solitude, do I prefer it?

Delighting in solitude takes work. But this shouldn't be confused with someone who 'delights' in solitude on account of their inability to cope with others or because they hate others. Those are wrong reasons and they're going to become obvious to whoever goes into solitude.

So ask yourself, "Am I ready for this?" No. Okay, so as a layperson, you should really start preparing yourself for it, even if you never go into complete solitude or ordain etc. You will get sick, you will die, your senses will fail. How do you think it feels when your senses fail? It feels like you're being confined more and more into one solitary box. That's where the Buddha gave that simile of the four mountains coming closer and closer from every direction and eventually crushing you, as in you have less and less space to move, less and less possibility of engaging with senses, which means less and less possibility of maintaining the domain of sensuality, the domain of distraction.

If your whole life is about avoiding that, but at the same time you think you're practising Dhamma that's a complete contradiction in terms. I'm not denying that being with others can be beneficial, or that a group of like-minded people can be helpful. But it's beneficial in as much as a school is helpful for somebody who's learning a craft, but the school can't do the craft for you. If you can find a person who is equal or superior to you, then go and learn from them, instead of associating with somebody who you can't learn anything from, even on the pretext of Dhamma.

Q: It says in Samyutta Nikaya 45.2:

"Venerable Ananda approaches the Buddha and says:

"Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship."

"Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path."

"And how, Ānanda, does a bhikkhu who has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path? Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu develops right view, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. He develops right intention ... right speech ... right action ... right livelihood ... right effort ... right mindfulness ... right composure, which is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release. It is in this way, Ānanda, that a bhikkhu who has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path."

"By the following method too, Ānanda, it may be understood how the entire holy life is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship: by relying upon me as a good friend, Ānanda, beings subject to birth are freed from birth; beings subject to ageing are freed from ageing; beings subject to death are freed from death; beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair are freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. By this method, Ānanda, it may be understood how the entire holy life is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship."

Nm: As you can see, the Buddha describes what he means by "*kalyāṇamitta*" (good friend), which is not someone who is just nice to you but someone who assists you in the cultivation of the Noble eightfold path, even if you haven't met them, just as we haven't met the Buddha, yet our entire holy life is determined by him.

Even though 'friendship' with a Noble one is essential (even just to the extent of hearing their Teaching second hand), still solitude plays a significant part in development, it's not negotiable. That's why the Buddha would encourage the monks with the right view to go into solitude, to go to an empty hut or root of a tree. And the person with the right view will actually do it rightly. They wouldn't be using solitude for any wrong reasons. So if you wish to develop the necessary ability to go into solitude, you shouldn't expect that ability overnight. But that doesn't mean that you don't start preparing yourself for it. If you want to develop mental strength or any form of strength, you acknowledge your weakness, then you realize what you want to develop. But avoiding solitude and developing random company instead, would be the equivalent of recognizing your weakness, and then using that as a justification to yourself that you shouldn't develop strength in the first place and instead should develop more of that weakness because that's truly the strength you seek.

